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THE RELATION OF PUBLIC HEALTH TO THE QUALITY OF MEDICINES.

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THE early history of medicine shows us that the remedial agents employed were composed mostly of what may be termed simples, consisting of crude herbs, roots, and various parts of the plant; also of various inorganic mineral simple combinations. The medical properties of these were fairly well made out. If we glance at the *materia medica* and the therapeutics of these times we are almost inclined to smile at the extreme simplicity and also at the ridiculous absurdities that had survived the superstitious era. One of the remarkable instances of this latter on record is that of the sympathetic powder of Sir Kenelm Digby, Knight of Montpellier. Whenever any wound had been inflicted this powder (composed of calcined green vitriol—ferrous sulfate) was applied to the weapon that had inflicted it, which was, moreover, covered with ointment and dressed two or three times a day. The wound itself, in the meantime, was directed to be brought together and carefully bound up with clean linen rags, but above all to be let alone for seven days; at the end of which period the bandage was removed, when the wound was generally found perfectly united. The triumph of the cure was decreed to the mysterious agency of the sympathetic powder which had been so assiduously applied to the weapon, whereas it is hardly necessary to observe that the promptness of the cure depended upon the total exclusion of the germ-laden air from the wound, and upon the sedative operations of nature not having received any disturbance from officious interference of art. Rational medicine grew out of this superstitious age as chemistry grew out of alchemy, and we find in primitive times the advent of what we might call domestic practice—suited to the sparsely settled country having few physicians. The followers of what we would term domestic practice were self-educated physicians, who devoted themselves to the introduction of family medicines and home medication—those earnest, conscientious persons, who received the sanction of medical practice of the day. The minister and the physician, we are told, were often one. Domestic medicine

was a necessity in those widely separated households. Some of the most conspicuous physicians of those times wrote domestic works for the people and taught them the rudiments of home medication. The lineal descendants of this class are the so-called patent medicines of our day. The old style of domestic medicines has been usurped by the present-day nostrums devised by those who claim the right to dose their fellow man, though themselves ignorant of the elements of pharmacy or medicine. The unfortunate result is that with this practice (controlled entirely by the spirit of commercialism) there has developed an era of self-medication, each one dosing himself with his own ideal nostrum, and his ideal is manufactured for him by the advertisements in the periodicals and in the daily press. This form of medication has grown to such an extent, and the commercial instinct has so cultivated and nourished it, that we are to-day facing a serious problem which has to do with public health. Into the various attractive packages of pills, powders, tablets and liquids have been compounded the synthetics, heart depressants, narcotics and treacherous drugs that may or may not be skilfully compounded—in some cases by irresponsible persons who have little or no pharmaceutical or medical knowledge, but have the money to exploit them. Both physicians and pharmacists are partly to blame for this condition.

We have recently examined some of the medicines of this class in the drug laboratory and find among them another condition which we did not suspect, namely, a deterioration of the material, a disintegration of what was supposed to be a stable compound. The compound may have been, when put up, in good condition, but a lapse of time has broken down its combination.

We would not have it understood that all combinations of this class contain death-dealing drugs, nor that all such medicinal agents are unstable. To be just and fair one must admit that some of the so-called patent medicines have the character of reputable combinations and are as useful as were the domestic remedies of primitive times, and we are not willing to say that if the two professions, pharmacy and medicine, should conscientiously seek to control them they would decide upon a war of their extermination. We do say, however, that for the public good some sort of control should be inaugurated. The food and drug law only partly meets the public demand.

It seems to us that a medicine of this class, before it is allowed to be placed on the open market, its formula and the resulting product should be properly inspected by responsible parties. This could be done without infringing upon the rights of the manufacturers or promoters.

The manufacturers of what are known as official remedial agents are obliged by law to maintain a well-defined standard in producing these agents. These standards are published, and the products put upon the market are at all times subject to chemical examination by authorized officials. This is as it should be. But if the federal government and the state require such rigid surveillance of the medicinal agents of the higher order for the protection of the public, how important is it that these agents of the lower order should be subject to some sort of standardization. These remedies, so artistically concealed from ordinary inspection by attractive wrapper and carton, are none the less liable to deterioration and diversity. It is not probable that this proposed exaction for these domestic remedies would work any hardship or injustice to the manufacturer or the trade. On the contrary, by raising the standard and instituting a judicious surveillance it would help both the manufacturer and the trade. It would discourage and drive out of business, it is true, those who take advantage of the much-abused privilege which men of all classes—trained and untrained—claim of dosing their fellow men on a purely commercial basis.